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XXXIV. AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRIEST *GENRE* IN THE MODERN FRENCH NOVEL

As the best method of reading Balzac is to follow, through the course of several novels, the history of some one character, so possibly there is no better way of approaching the modern French novel as a whole than by a study of the Catholic priest as there portrayed. He has appealed to practically every writer of first rank, and, moreover, purely as a character of fiction, quite aside from any significance that he may possess as indicating the faith of the author, or as exhibiting the Church and the work of her clergy. It is, accordingly, exclusively from the point of view of his rôle in literature that he is here treated. I shall take up the main themes in the ecclesiastical novel in an endeavor to indicate their relationship and to discover their general trend—an aspect of the subject that is neglected by Paul Franche in his *Le Prêtre dans le roman français*. I shall also continue the examination by including novels published since 1902, the date of Franche's study.

In spite of the universality of the priest type, a few dominant themes suffice for its portrayal. The bad priest enjoyed ascendancy early in the century. De Vigny created in 1826 the treacherous and unscrupulous spy, Père Joseph, "the gray shadow of Richelieu." The year 1831 saw the selfish and cruel Claude Frollo rise from Victor Hugo's romanticism, and the cynic Julien Sorel, who has become the synonym for grasping and relentless ambition, from Stendhal's realism. Although of great importance as reflecting an attitude, Julien Sorel, as a clerical type, did not persist. The few other wicked priests are of a decidedly weaker stamp. Abbé Faujas in Zola's *La Conquête de Plassans*, (1874) as the priest *mal peigné*, offers a repulsive personality which makes no vigorous appeal to the reader. Le Chanoine

Docre, the priest of the black mass, in *Là-Bas* (1891), is the most revolting expression of Huysmans' decadence. Jules Lemaitre and Renan, both of them once seminarists, declare that there are practically no bad priests.¹ This fact no doubt explains why the pencil and note-book period gave us no great impersonations of that type. The wicked priest belonged more particularly to the years of romanticism.

The good and devout priest, on the other hand, is legion; at the same time he is less important than the wicked priest in the general development of the clerical novel, and also as a character study. Just as the bad priest was the product of the first half of the century, so his kindly, and often simple minded counterpart, received his best portrayals in the second half. Hugo's Abbé Myriel, bishop of Digne, and Ferdinand Fabre's Abbé Courbezon, the French Vicar of Wakefield, both appeared in 1862. The latter was the victim of a passion for erecting charitable institutions which involved him in disasters even more overwhelming than those which befell the good Dr. Primrose. To the same period belong Daudet's priests, and those of Jules Lemaitre. They are interesting primarily because their lives center about some pathetic or amusing incident of daily life, or, as in the case of Abbé Myriel, because the method of presentation is dramatic. The alertness with which the good bishop hands over the silver candlesticks to Jean Valjean and thus frees him from the suspicions of the police has ever its thrill for the reader. Abbé Constantin, on the other hand, lacks interest, for he is not amusing, neither has he any profound understanding of human nature. Paul Bourget, however, in *Le Saint* (1904) describes a simple and kindly priest whose strength of mind and character make a strong claim for our admiration. Although in his later novels, Fabre makes his priests so simple minded that they are foolish,² in *Mon*

¹ Lemaitre, *Les Contemporains*, II, p. 297. Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*. *Le petit séminaire Saint Nicolas*, I, "Je n'ai connu que de bons prêtres." Cf. Prévost, *Le Scorpion*, p. 335.

² Cf. Abbé Renaud, (Feuillet's *Sibylle*) who was put to eat with the children and treated as an inferior.

Oncle Célestin (1881) he has painted the finest portrait of the kindly priest in all French literature. This idealized portrait is rendered by a boy under the spell of affectionate admiration for his uncle. His love struck so true a tone that "Mon Oncle Célestin" is as real a character as the author has drawn. He is strictly a masculine type, and of a moral and spiritual eminence that bespeaks virility and fearlessness. Unlike Abbé Courbezon he is the victim of no charitable or pious illusions. His life is normal for one who has established the highest standards of rectitude and righteousness for himself, but who is tolerant and sympathetic toward others. His spirituality but reveals more clearly his human qualities. In *Le Curé de Campagne*, Balzac makes Abbé Bonnet the spokesman of an idealized ecclesiasticism. He desired to prove that "la religion catholique, prise dans ses oeuvres humaines, est la seule vraie, la seule bonne et belle puissance civilisatrice."³ This expresses the aim of all true priests, but it does not contain adequate motivation for a powerful novel of either character or plot.

The great ecclesiastical novels, those whose plots center in the soul stress of a priest, have not to do with either of the two foregoing types. With the exception of *L'Abbé Tigrane* and *Le Curé de Tours*, these portray the young man who has taken the vows, or at least has entered upon the period of noviciate, *sans vocation*. His unfitness is due either to a want of moral strength, or to a lack of the ecclesiastical mind,⁴ to an inability to subject *le sens personnel* to the will and personality of the Church. As Zola says somewhere, "Ça a mal tourné pour le garçon qui agonize sous la soutane." This agonizing struggle and its effects mentally, morally and physically, constitute the theme of prime importance in the entire *genre*.

The whole problem of the priest *sans vocation* was raised by *Jocelyn* in 1836. For that reason this poem is one of the most significant works of fiction of the century. It was not

³ See page 123.

⁴ Cf. Lemaitre, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

the idealized and devout priest like Chateaubriand's Abbé Aubry that was destined to inspire a considerable amount of interesting literature, but Lamartine's dynamic and struggling priest.⁵ Jocelyn's struggle to renounce Laurence reveals the latent love theme that was later to be intensified and developed in the novel.⁶ The philosophic aspect of the poem reflects the spirit of Lamennais, who became the inspiration for the rebellious priest of fiction. In the love of nature is found the first promptings of the fatal passion that culminates the lifelong sorrows of Jocelyn. Lamartine's elaboration of Alpine scenery seems to have suggested the proper setting and background for many of the succeeding stories of ecclesiastical passion.⁷

La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret and *Mademoiselle La Quintinie*, while reviving an old theme popular in the middle ages, are but another rendering of the struggle against love. Though Zola gives young Abbé Mouret a mystical turn of mind and a desire to subject himself fully to the will and spirit of the Church, he makes him fall because his whole physical and psychological organization is inadequate to

⁵ Cf. Lemaître, *op. cit.*, séries 6. Also Faguet, *Etudes Littéraires du XIX siècle*.

⁶ Although as early as 1822 Balzac wrote *Le Vicaire des Ardennes* à la Jean Jacques and à la Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, both Joseph and Adolphe were never anything but lovers in spite of the fact that they wore the cassock. Their sorrows were but another brand of the *mal du siècle*, and were in no way tinged by the soul stress of a true ecclesiastic. For the influence of *Jocelyn* on feminine susceptibilities see Merimée's humorous and cynical story of *L'Abbé Aubain*. *L'Abbé Daniel* by André Theuriet is a bourgeois rendering of much this same theme, but the priest's struggle to renounce his love lacks intensity. Under the date of March 184—he says, "Je fis avec transport le sacrifice de ma volonté." Never once, however, did his soul cry out in rebellion against this sacrifice. Cf. also *L'Abbé Roche* in *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* by G. Droz. Maupassant in *Le Baptême* describes admirably the priest in whose heart the paternal instinct still lives.

⁷ Cf. the park Paradou in *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, the mountain scenery in *Le Scorpion* and in many of Fabre's novels. Cf. also the descriptions of the tropical forests on the Island of Martinique, and of the romantic castle gardens in France in *Le Vicaire des Ardennes*.

cope with his innate craving for woman in his worship of the Holy Virgin. His mental and nervous collapse afforded an interesting pathological study of unusual charm to the naturalists. In *Mademoiselle La Quintinie* (1863) George Sand has presented the reverse experience. Madame La Quintinie in transferring earthly love to love for the Christ realizes too late that the Christ has assumed the personality of her confessor.⁸ The book is of importance not only as a retort to Octave Feuillet's *Sibylle* (1862), but it is related to the whole subject of the effect of mysticism on the home. Fabre in *Madame Fuster* (1887) presents the study of a wife and mother in whose affections God took the place of husband and daughter.⁹ In *L'Evangéliste* (1883) Daudet describes a protestant home broken up by religious mysticism.¹⁰

Charles Géniaux has recently expanded Renan's account of the Breton flax-breaker's daughter and her love for her confessor into a psychological novel, *La passion d'Armelle Louanais* (1918).¹¹ The plot well illustrates Renan's statement in regard to the Bretons that "nulle race ne compte plus de morts par amour; ce qui domine, c'est la lente consommation. C'est (l'amour) une volupté intérieur qui use et tue."¹² Young Abbé Nicolas Helléan had entered the priesthood largely under the impulsion of his bishop and not through any deep sense of his divine calling, and so became

⁸ Cf. Marcel Tinayre, *Hellé*, p. 121, "La femme est par nature idolâtre et mystique. Elle se donne au Dieu chrétien parceque ce Dieu s'est fait homme." Cf. also Maupassant, *Bel Ami*, where Madame Walters suddenly sees her lover in the painting of the Christ.

⁹ See pp. 8, 9, 10; p. 88, "Vous et votre Dieu, vous vous êtes emparés de ma femme, vous me l'avez ravie." Cf. *Mlle. La Quintinie*, p. 70, "partage son âme avec le prêtre." The situation of Colonel La Quintinie resembles that of General Fuster. Cf. also *Dupecus* by Paul Fraycourt. No doubt Michelet inspired these novels of protest. See *Le prêtre, la femme et la famille*, pp. 18, 63, and *Les Jésuites*, Conference VI. Cf. also *Un prêtre marié* by Barbey d'Aurevilly, p. 262, "Nous avons, vous pour rival, et moi pour ennemi, le dieu de Calixte, le dieu de la Croix."

¹⁰ For protestant asceticism see also André Gide, *La porte étroite*.

¹¹ Awarded the "Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française."

¹² *Le broyeur de lin*, ch. III.

a ready disciple of the great Lamennais. He thus incurred the displeasure of the bishop who assigned him a remote parish where his new and heretical doctrines would have little chance to work harm. His one relief from the loneliness of his isolation consisted in his friendship for Mlle. Louanais. His will power and his discretion availed little against the workings of his passion. In the course of time his physical vigor broke and he died in sorrow and neglect. Armelle lived but a few months longer. The author contrasts the fullness of life in all nature with the barrenness of the life of the ecclesiastic. He dwells upon the appeal that nature makes to every heart, and its effect upon the passions of the young priest, forcing him to regret a calling that denies him what is common to all life. "Cette pensée terrible s'imposait à son esprit que, plus ou moins, la croix barre la vue libre de la nature et que le grand Pan n'a rien à faire avec le divin crucifié."¹³

The struggle of the would-be monk Durtal against the temptations of the flesh, as described by Huysmans in *En Route* (1895), resembles in no way the bitter agony of the man who already wears the cassock. His restless soul covets the consolation and solitude of a religious retreat, but his sickly mind confuses true religion with the abnormal and grotesque aspects of asceticism.¹⁴ He reminds us of a society youth who has gone slumming in a Trappist monastery. He suggests a sort of ecclesiastical René whose ill defined longings but lead him into even greater distress. He finally confesses that he has not the will power or the bodily resistance to undergo the privations exacted even of a novice.

In *Le Scorpion* (1887) by Marcel Prévost and in *L'Empreinte* (1896) by Edouard Estaunié we have the portrayal of two young men, who consciously or unconsciously, did not possess the ecclesiastical mind, and all the agony, both mental and physical, arising from their affiliations with the Church was due to this fact. The first of these books places

¹³ Page 110.

¹⁴ See pp. 206-209.

the emphasis on physical suffering, and the other on mental agony. *Le Scorpion* is an experimental study of the conflict between the natural sex instincts of Jules Auradou and his religious tendencies, the intensity of both being inherited.¹⁵ Through the influence of Père Jayme, a Jesuit friend, Jules enters one of the schools of that Order at Paris. But longing for his native hills proves so powerful that his desire to become a priest is completely arrested for the time being, and he returns home for a brief visit to recuperate from a period of illness. There, revived by the sight of his beloved mountains, he again feels the insistence of his vocation. At the same time he renews his acquaintance with one of the village girls. In the hope of saving her from the sort of life led by her mother, a woman of low repute, he endeavors to convert her. She fascinates him, but he supposes that the pleasure he experiences in her presence is due to spiritual joy at saving a soul for the Church. He returns to his duties at Paris. Finally after months of torture, the result of an inner harassing of his whole nervous system, the secret source of which remains entirely unknown to him, he makes his escape from the school. The sense of personal liberty overjoys him. He revels in the idea that never again will those men in black surround and circumscribe his whole life of thought and action. In the mean time the girl whose soul's salvation he had earnestly sought in his native village, has come to Paris and there leads the sort of life taught her by her mother. Like a magnet Jeanne draws Jules to her. Père Jayme discovers them living together in an obscure hotel. Jules' love for his old friend turns to hate. The priest, however, persuades Jeanne to leave her lover. Once more the young abbé returns to his native mountains. The long secret harassing of his nervous system and of his emotions has completely undermined his health. First he loses his hearing, then his sight, and lastly his mind. He dies as a result of the secretly inhibitive power of religion on his nervous and

¹⁵ See p. 340.

emotional organization. Not once had the longing for religious consecration so fired his imagination that the Church would win control of his will.

Père Jayme gazing from his window at night out over Paris reflects on the surging life there.¹⁶ His anger is enkindled as he thinks of the wickedness of the people. He pauses to ask himself why. They could yield to their temptations. He could not sin even though he so wished. When temptations confronted him, "quelque chose d'infranchissable se dresserait entre la faute et lui; la Grâce sans doute."¹⁷ God was presenting to him as a test, not the temptation to do evil, but sudden resentment at having attained perfection. "Devenu ange, il regrettait un instant sa nature perdue d'homme."¹⁸ Realizing the force of the test reserved for him, he at once prostrated himself in prayer to thank God for making him his chosen servant. Such devotion surpassed the conscious feeling and mental grasp of Jules.

Léonard Clan, the chief character in *L'Empreinte*, is educated in a Jesuit school. He finds much that appeals to him in the quiet life of his teachers. His confessor ventures to explain to him God's exactions from one who takes orders. "Il faut dire adieu au monde. Se faire religieux, c'est y renoncer, rentrer dans le néant, être le bâton dans la main de la Providence, et qui ne résiste jamais à son action."¹⁹ Later when Léonard is about to enter upon his noviciate, Le Père Provincial says to him, "Nous ne vous demanderons qu'une chose: l'obéissance. Obéir, obéir d'une façon absolue! toute la vocation tient là. Une fois noviciat, j'exigerai de vous le dépouillement de l'homme. Vous ne devrez plus être que par moi et pour Dieu."²⁰ The prospect of becoming the property of the Père Provincial terrified him. Here we

¹⁶ See pp. 335 ff.

¹⁷ See p. 536.

¹⁸ See p. 536.

¹⁹ See p. 53.

²⁰ See p. 95.

find re-echoed the dominant thought of Fabre.²¹ The boy envies his friends who are not planning for themselves a career in the Church, and rejoices that he is still free. Doubts burden his mind lest he never attain the perfection required of a priest. He wonders at the assurance of the novices as the moment of taking the eternal vows approaches. Then suddenly he is summoned to Paris. This glimpse of the outside world, like young Fabre's Christmas holidays, is the real cause of his refusal to enter the Church.²² All that he undertakes thereafter proves a failure. He never loves, but in his loneliness he thinks he will adopt the easy morals of his friends. This venture gives him no satisfaction and even adds bitterness to his sadness. After seven years he meets his former confessor and in anger defiantly declares to him, "Je ne connais qu'un acte irréparable, c'est l'attentat commis par vous sur ma conscience d'enfant."²³ Notwithstanding his rebellion, the influence of the priest had been like a poison of which he could not purge his soul. At last he returns to the monastery, broken in spirit, unfit for life in the world and, in spite of the stamp of the Jesuit upon his conscience, unfit for monastic orders.

Pierre Froment, portrayed by Zola in *Lourdes* and in *Rome*, presents a striking contrast to Huysmans' Durtal, who, as we have seen, was led to the Church through a fondness for mysticism, even though this mysticism was of the grewsome sort, and also through a desire to gain a powerful ally in his fight against the temptations of the flesh. Froment, on the other hand, because of a scientific turn of mind, questions the efficacy of the purely mystical appeal of religion, and because of a Voltairian insistence upon justice, turns away from the Church. Love as a factor unfitting

²¹ Cf. *Ma Vocation*, p. 423, and also *Lucifer*, p. 389, "Le prêtre est un être qui s'abandonne, se sacrifie, abdique, et lui [Jourfier] trop entier pour s'oublier lui-même, n'avait su rien faire de cela."

²² Cf. *Ma Vocation*, p. 324. See also R. P. Bowen, *The Novels of Ferdinand Fabre*, p. 18.

²³ See p. 203.

him for his vocation forms no part of his discontent. This is the case also with Abbé Jourfier in *Lucifer*. Here Ferdinand Fabre probably presents the most penetrating analysis in French literature of the priest who lacks the ecclesiastical mind. Both Froment and Jourfier are apparently fashioned in the spirit of Lamennais. They, too, go on a fruitless mission to Rome and return to revolt against the authority of the Church.

Lucifer (1884) tells the story of the attempt of a priest to overthrow the power of the Jesuits and to secure for himself personal and religious freedom. Bertrand Jourfier was the son of a Republican, the avowed enemy of the Jesuits. Their hostility induced this Society to try to prevent the ordination of Bertrand. This opposition led him, in spite of mental and spiritual misgivings regarding his vocation,²⁴ to take orders of sub-deacon. His proud nature could tolerate no opposition nor humiliation of personal dignity without there being aroused within him the most bitter and violent resentment. Cardinal Finella who had trained his ear to detect the voice of God heard only that of the man in Abbé Jourfier.²⁵ He overcame the temptations of the flesh only after a long hard struggle. Though he could master his physical nature in accordance with the laws of the Church, he could not subject his mind to her dictates. He finally desired to leave the Church, for she had deceived his hopes and ruined his life. She had become a prison from which there was no escape. He held that vows once assumed were for all eternity and could not be forsaken even though they were wrong, since they prevented his moral and spiritual development. Christmas eve, just before the celebration of the midnight mass, he rushed madly from the lonely tower which he used as a study out into the violent storm. Shortly afterwards his dead body was found bruised and bleeding at the base of the high wall overlooking the river. In the dark-

²⁴ See p. 71, "La vérité est que je suis entré dans l'église sans avoir entendu clairement à mon oreille la voix de la vocation."

²⁵ See p. 320.

ness and the blinding snow he had, apparently, lost his way, and had fallen over the parapet. The opposite of Abbé Jourfier, states Jules Lemaître, is the typical Catholic priest.²⁶

Paul Bourget in *Le démon de Midi* (1914) throws a new and clearer light upon the soul stress of men like Froment and Jourfier. According to his psychological interpretation it arises from a renewal, in middle life, of the passions of youth, and often expresses itself in ardour for revolt against the restraints of existing orders. Though obviously unfair to the rebellious Abbé Fauchon in his descriptions of the priest's conjugal relations, the author has made an exalted appeal for the continuance of the institution of celibacy. The frightful tragedy for which Abbé Fauchon's revolt was in large part responsible was necessary in order to humble his ardent and independent spirit and to bring him to the point of subjecting his will to that of the Church. The book recalls Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Un prêtre marié* (1865) in respect to the inevitable suffering caused to others by this transgression of the laws of the Church, but the latter is largely romantic and mystical in its treatment of the subject.²⁷

Among clerical novels Ferdinand Fabre's *L'Abbé Tigrane* (1873) stands preeminently great. Though a story of passion like the foregoing already discussed, it is not of the kind to provoke the victim to rebell against the Church hierarchy. Rather is it a profound psychological study in ecclesiastical ambition. The peasant Rufin Capdepont, known as Tigrane, assumed the responsibility of the priesthood without the slightest misgivings as to his vocation. Early in his career he was fired with the ambition to become bishop, possibly even Pope. To that end he willingly sacrificed his stubborn pride, and humiliated himself to secure preferment. Realizing the power of the Baroness Thévenot in official circles, he ingratiated himself completely into her favor. His relations

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 297.

²⁷ Abbé Sombrevail seems to be another Jean Valjean. The book appeared just three years after *Les Misérables*.

with her resemble in no way, however, those of a Julien Sorel. He held in high regard his ecclesiastical obligations. Too, ambition had dried up all emotions of the heart, and blinded him to the indelicacy of his position. It had lost him friends, and won him enemies whose hostilities embittered him. He persisted, nevertheless, in his relentless ambition. He ruthlessly crushed anyone who opposed him. Having at last been appointed bishop, he became sensitive to the hostility of the clergy in his diocese. So he considered it the part of wisdom to live as a recluse. In so doing he still obeyed the supreme law of his interests, and not of his happiness. Often the lonesome cloister resounded with the cries which the wounds inflicted upon his character, his dignity and his high position wrung from him. The power of his office was his sole comfort. The Church hierarchy never once came into serious conflict, as was the case with Abbé Jourfier, with his sense of personal liberty. Rather did it afford him an exceptional opportunity to gratify his dominant passion, ambition, which is as truly a human quality as is love, or pride, or indignation. The purpose of the book appears to be to affirm what the author stated in *Les Courbezons*, "that after all priests are but men."²⁸ In public they may be different, but their private lives resemble the lives of other men.

This is also true of the priests in *Le Curé de Tours*, easily the second of the great studies in clerical portraiture. They reflect the selfishness and pettiness of their provincial city as fully as does Mademoiselle Gamard, and they are as natural an expression of their environment as are the other residents of Tours. Flaubert makes Abbé Bournisien blend perfectly into the dull lights through which Monsieur Homais looks at the world. There was nothing spiritual in his manner of comforting the dying, and in administering the last sacraments. The druggist's remark that priests are like crows which the dead attract harmonizes admirably with the

²⁸ See p. 82.

whole tone of *Madame Bovary*.²⁹ Anatole France presents Monseigneur Guitrel³⁰ as far more interested in his living than in his vocation. Too, this author disclosed very little of the divine in the shrewd Abbé Coignard with his Rabelaisian philosophy of life, and yet his Christian faith complied with the requirements of the Church. Les Goncourt make Abbé Blampoix in *René Mauperin* the councillor of ladies of high society. Though of use in readapting their religion to their convenience, he is not impelled to his duties by deep spirituality.

Paul Franche protests that the novelists of the nineteenth century have failed to understand the character of the priest, which is, as it were, a new compound of the human and the divine.³¹ Thus, as it seems to him, the only successful clerical portrait is that of Abbé Firmin sketched by Ivès le Querdec in *Lettres d'un curé de campagne*. From his point of view he is quite right. Practically no dominant personality exerting a guiding hand in the great problems of human destiny has been portrayed from the spiritual side except Abbé Myriel, who represents the power of the spiritual teachings of the Sermon on the Mount in the affairs of men and society as against the ineffectiveness of law as personified in Javert. If the spiritual has had little importance in plot development, pure viciousness has had little more. Père Joseph alone dares to reveal the secrets of the confessional for political purposes. In the main, by avoiding both extremes, the modern novelist has chosen to emphasize the more natural human qualities in the character of the ecclesiastic.³² The priest of fiction, then, is not an *homme à part*, but rather is he a normal man forced to live in a *milieu à part*, and the great clerical themes strive to reveal and interpret his intense and agonizing struggle for readjustment.

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²⁹ See p. 358.

³⁰ *L'Anneau d'améthyste*.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 15, 308.

³² Cf. *Le démon de midi*, p. 373, "Les meilleurs de nous ne sont que des hommes, de pauvres hommes."